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Municipal Reference Bulletin No. 2

MUNICIPAL DANCE HALLS



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Municipal Reference Bulletin No. 2

MUNICIPAL DANCE HALLS

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This report has been prepared at the request of his Honor, Mayor Carter H. Harrison.

It is hoped that it will prove useful to members of the Chicago City Council, municipal department and bureau heads, social workers and others who may seek information on the subject. It is a summary of the efforts that have been made in six cities of the United States toward the municipal establishment and operation of open public dance halls.

FREDERICK REX,
Municipal Reference Librarian.

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MESSAGE OF MAYOR HARRISON.

Office of the Mayor, {
Chicago, March 9, 1914. }

To the Honorable, the City Council:

Gentlemen—For some time I have felt it desirable, in order to provide additional recreation and amusement for the youthful of both sexes, that the City should undertake the experiment of establishing municipal dance halls in which, under proper auspices and with proper chaperonage, young men and women could gather for purposes of recreation.

The experiment has been tried out in other communities. To secure information as to the methods employed and the results obtained, some time ago I requested the Municipal Reference Library to make inquiries and secure data from all cities in which municipal dance halls have been maintained.

This information has been secured and incorporated in a report which I have the honor to transmit herewith for reference to an appropriate committee, with the recommendation that the subject matter receive immediate attention in order that at the earliest possible date social centers of this character may be established and opportunity be offered to young men and young women to indulge in innocent and healthful recreation under suitable auspices.

To give the matter a thorough test municipal dance halls should be established on the North, Northwest, Southwest and South Sides and also in South Chicago. Personally I believe the cost and maintenance of the halls should be covered entirely by the municipality. The report of the Municipal Reference Library, however, shows that in all communities, where dances of this character have been established, there has been a charge made sufficient to cover the absolute expenses of the same and also that the privilege of furnishing soft drinks and light refreshments has been awarded to contractors on the basis of a percentage of the receipts being turned over to the communities and applied to the funds from which the dances are maintained. Whether municipal dance halls locally should be maintained free of all expense or whether a nominal charge should be made, is a matter for the consideration of your Committee.

Yours respectfully,

(Signed) CARTER H. HARRISON,

Mayor.

Introduction.

In the effort to provide places where young men and women may gather for purposes of social recreation under wholesome auspices, a large number of cities in the United States have established social centers in the public schools and park field houses. Here people may enjoy facilities for play, amusement or rest, such as social dancing, banquets, social entertainments, parties, and the like.

The City of Chicago has a large number of public schools and park field houses which are used for social centers and are supported and directed by the school and park authorities. Social dances, arranged and conducted by clubs or groups in their immediate, or from distant, neighborhoods, are held with considerable frequency. Greater interest attaches to these dances than to any other form of social enjoyment. No admission fees are charged and in the park field houses various groups and persons are given the use of the halls in rotation for dances. No group or person is permitted to conduct a dance for profit or as a business enterprise.

These public dances conducted in Chicago under the auspices of its public school and park boards are entirely dissimilar and should be distinguished from open public dances where girls may go unattended, which are open to any individual without qualification or classification except restriction as to age and personal behavior, and which are a source of revenue to the municipality.

In the belief that properly conducted dance halls meet a public need, a number of cities have established municipal dance halls and open public dances. The object has been to provide for certain sections of the city, halls where opportunities for participation in wholesome recreation would be offered to all classes of people, young, middle aged and old.

The cities that have established municipal dance halls are emphasizing:
First—Adequate supervision and chaperonage.

Second—Public opportunities for dancing that cost less than the commercialized enterprises.

Third—Sanitary, well ventilated and well lighted halls.

Fourth—Permit no liquor to be sold and supply instead cold drinking water and soft drinks.

Fifth—Provide high grade music and prohibit objectionable dancing.

The result of an investigation into the subject of municipal dance halls is herewith given and shows the experience of such American cities as have established the same.

BOSTON, MASS.

Since last autumn the Park and Recreation Department of Boston has been conducting municipal dances in the city gymnasium. These dances are free, the cost of maintenance and operation being borne by the city. Dances have been given at the rate of one each week from 8 to 10:30 P. M. Owing to their success and popularity with the masses, plans are being made to conduct three or more weekly.

CINCINNATI, OHIO.

During the administration of Mayor Hunt a municipal dance hall was opened, under the supervision and direction of the Women's Civic Commission. The first dance was held April 12, 1913. Dances are now given every Saturday night and on all holidays, in the north wing of the local Music Hall, the latter being a large brick building. The dimensions of the dance floor are 85x280 feet, or an area of 23,800 square feet. The cost of equipping the

hall was between \$300 and \$400, not including the purchase of a piano. The hall is lighted by incandescent electricity and windows, and two large double exit doors afford means of ventilation. The hall has comfort stations and rest rooms.

A caterer serves refreshments, consisting of soft drinks and ice cream, in connection with the dance hall, allowing the city a percentage on the number of his sales, in return for the concession.

An orchestra of four pieces composed of piano, drum and first and second violins, furnishes the music at the dances. An admission fee of fifteen cents per person is charged, which includes the use of the wardrobe room for checking wraps and other personal apparel. No return checks are given. The charge of admission has been placed at a minimum consistent with the expense of conducting the dance.

Supervision.

The dances are conducted under the supervision of two paid supervisors, assisted by from six to eight volunteers. A policeman in regular uniform is stationed at the door and frequently an officer in plain clothes mingles among the dancers. The operating staff consists of a manager, cashier, ticket taker, six check boys and a maid.

The dance hall is open to the public every Saturday night from 8:00 to 11:30 o'clock and a children's dance is given on Saturday afternoons during the hours from 2:00 to 5:00 o'clock. Minors are not admitted to the evening dances unless they are at least sixteen years of age. The dance hall is entirely self-supporting.

Twenty-two dances were given by the municipality during the year 1913 and the total revenue and expense from their operation was as follows:

		Average per dance
Revenue	\$2,285.55.....	103.88
Expense	2,226.80.....	101.21

The total number of persons attending the twenty-two dances was 14,153, or an average of 643 persons per dance.

Results Achieved.

The municipal dances have demonstrated that young people prefer going to a place adequately supervised, with clean and wholesome surroundings. They feel absolutely safe in attending and in many instances the parents accompany the boys and girls. Girls come, dance and go home together. As a result of the establishment of the municipal dance hall, other dance halls in the city are exercising a stricter supervision. Recently a suburb of Cincinnati requested the authorities of the latter city to establish a municipal dance hall within its limits. This has been done, with similarly satisfactory results.

The Juvenile Protective Association of Cincinnati in its report made December 1, 1913, on a "Recreation Survey of Cincinnati" summarized the dance hall situation thus:

"Among the few places which offer opportunity for wholesome pleasure is the 'popular supervised dance' conducted every Saturday evening in the north wing of Music Hall by the Woman's Civic Commission. Although the admission charge is only fifteen cents, when at the other halls it is a quarter, the dance is self-supporting. A good band provides the music; members of the Commission supervise in person, and ice cream and soft drinks can be secured at one end of the hall. No return checks are given. This dance is patronized largely by people who never attended public dances before, and does not really compete with the bad commercial dance halls. Nevertheless, it is a splendid public experiment and meets a need in the community."

CLEVELAND, OHIO.

While the School Board of Cleveland was debating the question of providing municipal dance halls in the school auditoriums throughout the city, objection being made that an admission fee could not be charged for functions in school buildings, Mayor Baker, inasmuch as no city ordinance was required, issued an executive order authorizing municipal dances in the park shelter houses.

Dance Halls Opened.

The first municipal dance hall was inaugurated in August, 1912, in Edgewater Park, the latter having Lake Erie on one side and on the other a congested manufacturing and tenement district not far distant from immense ore docks. Mayor and Mrs. Baker led the grand march at the opening ceremony, followed by their children and municipal officials. The first dance was pronounced a tremendous success, 11,630 three-cent dance tickets being sold, making the receipts for the day \$348.90. The estimated maximum expenses for one week are \$300. One ticket seller on the opening night, sold 2,700 tickets in an hour. Another dance hall has since been opened at another park shelter house. These shelter houses were converted into dancing pavilions at a very low cost, merely requiring the putting in of maple flooring. The dimensions of the dancing floor at Edgewater Park are 83x34 feet and at Woodland Hills Park 76x33 feet. The parks being city property, no rental is required.

Park pavilions are brilliantly lighted by electricity. Open air ventilation is provided and revolving fans keep the temperature cool and pleasant. A comfort station has been constructed in the building at Edgewater Park and the comfort stations at Woodland Hills Park are convenient to the pavilion. Refreshments are sold by concessionaires at near-by stands and include soft drinks, ice cream, candy and the like. Drinking fountains are also conveniently located to these buildings. Music is furnished by an orchestra of six musicians, a balcony suitably arranged for the same, as well as a good piano, having been installed at each pavilion.

Control and Supervision.

No general admission is charged, but tickets are sold at the rate of three cents per couple for each dance. A fee of three cents per person covers the checking of wraps, coats and hats, a room sufficiently large to take care of this feature without any confusion having been provided.

Control and supervision over the municipal dance halls is exercised by experienced employes of the Park Department, a manager, chaperon, ticket takers, policemen and other attendants being detailed at each pavilion.

Dances are held daily, with the exception of Sunday, during the summer season. Afternoon sessions are held daily at Edgewater Park from 2:30 to 5:00 P. M., and at Woodland Hills Park during the same hours on Saturday afternoon. Evening sessions at both pavilions are from 7:30 to 10:30 P. M.

Minors under eighteen years of age, unless accompanied by their parents or responsible chaperons, are excluded after 9:00 P. M.

Financial Success.

The receipts and expenses of the two pavilions, with the number of tickets sold and persons participating in the amusement during the years 1912 and 1913, were as follows:

	1912	1913
Total receipts	\$7,394.31	\$18,491.16
Total expenses	5,160.02	11,507.71
Net earnings	2,234.29	6,983.45
Tickets sold to couples.....	246,477	616,732
Persons attending	492,954	1,233,464

The pavilions have proved very successful, both from a social and financial standpoint. They have provided clean, wholesome recreation at a minimum cost and the moral tone of the halls is a great improvement over the ordinary public dance hall. Every possible safeguard has been provided for the proper protection of the patrons. Not only was the very best orchestra employed, but more policemen were secured for supervision of the dance hall and adjoining grounds than the city would have required of any private concern and each dance number was twice as long as the duration of a dance in the commercial dance halls, while the price per dance was but one-half that charged in the latter.

The object in view in establishing the municipal dance halls was to offer an opportunity for dancing under the best possible conditions at a minimum cost. The young people patronize the dance halls for the reason that here they can spend their evenings at dancing amid wholesome surroundings for a much less sum than it would cost at the ordinary commercial dance hall.

Good Accomplished.

Owing to the great success and the vast amount of good accomplished by the municipal dance halls, there is a strong demand for the erection and operation of such halls during the winter months. This demand has been given added emphasis in view of the closing by the city of thirty-two public dance halls, because the buildings or their surrounding conditions were such as to render them unfit for dance halls. These thirty-two halls eliminated from the dance hall roster were all of the same type, namely, cheap neighborhood, saloon halls. However, the City Dance Hall Inspector of Cleveland, Mr. Robert O. Bartholomew, unwilling to ignore the social value of the closed dance halls as neighborhood centers, points out the duty of the community in the premises in the following words:

"In these buildings during the past, small beneficial lodges, neighborhood societies and social clubs would hold their dances on different evenings of the week. They were the neighborhood club houses in the sections of the city where they were located. Here was offered the only opportunity for general gatherings of a social nature which were generally followed by dancing. The entire family participated in these dances which would, but for the demoralizing surroundings, have provided the means by which the citizens living near them could have enjoyed the recreational and social life which is necessary to the well being and proper development of every normal citizen. These halls have been dismantled, and there are now no club houses for many thousands of Cleveland's citizens. We pass legislation prescribing conditions under which man may work to earn his daily bread; we have our model ordinances to regulate in minute detail the construction of the buildings in which our work is done and we even regulate the construction of the homes in which we live together with all of the elements which enter into general living conditions of our daily life, but until the present ordinance was passed we had neglected to make it our concern as to where or how his hours of recreation are spent. Thus it is no wonder that many have realized large profits by commercializing man's instinct for play. The present regulations have been more or less exterminative in nature. In the endeavor to eliminate the element of commercialism we are on the verge of restricting dancing to the favored few who possess sufficient means to provide for themselves places to dance. The present regulations have necessarily driven out of existence the majority of cheap saloon dance halls. While it has probably been greatly beneficial it has also brought about a problem which the municipal government can alone remedy. The social family life of those living in congested sections of the city has been almost exterminated with reference to dancing. The men now go to the corner saloon for a social evening. The wife possibly visits with a neighborly woman, but there is no place for the family to join in a

good time except perhaps the moving picture show, where the period of enjoyment is of short duration and where there is no opportunity for such relaxation from daily cares as is provided in dancing. The average laboring man's neighborhood club cannot afford to rent such a hall as is now offered for the purposes of holding a dance because it costs from \$25 to \$50 more than it used to cost to rent a cheap hall. There are a very great many citizens who are deprived of their just opportunities for social recreation. Private capital hesitates to establish such halls as it becomes for them an experiment with probable small profits for the investment. Neighborhood dance halls under municipal supervision should be established in several of the congested residence districts of the city. Through the wholesome influence there exerted many individuals would be conserved as positive units in society for helpfulness instead of being allowed to become negative quantities to be neutralized by belated educated or penal reformation."

DENVER, COLO.

During the winter of 1912-1913 the Commissioner of Supplies of the City of Denver arranged for a series of four municipal dances in the city auditorium. An admission fee merely sufficient to defray expenses, of twenty-five cents per couple, was charged. The dances were supervised by Denver's sole woman police officer, who held the position of inspector of amusements. According to this official the dances were a success financially and socially. However, with a change in the city administrative policy and the initiation of the commission form of government last year, municipal dances were discontinued and the city auditorium has again been rented to private parties for public dances. These latter, owing to inadequate supervision, have become discredited and the Woman's Club of Denver has requested that they be stopped.

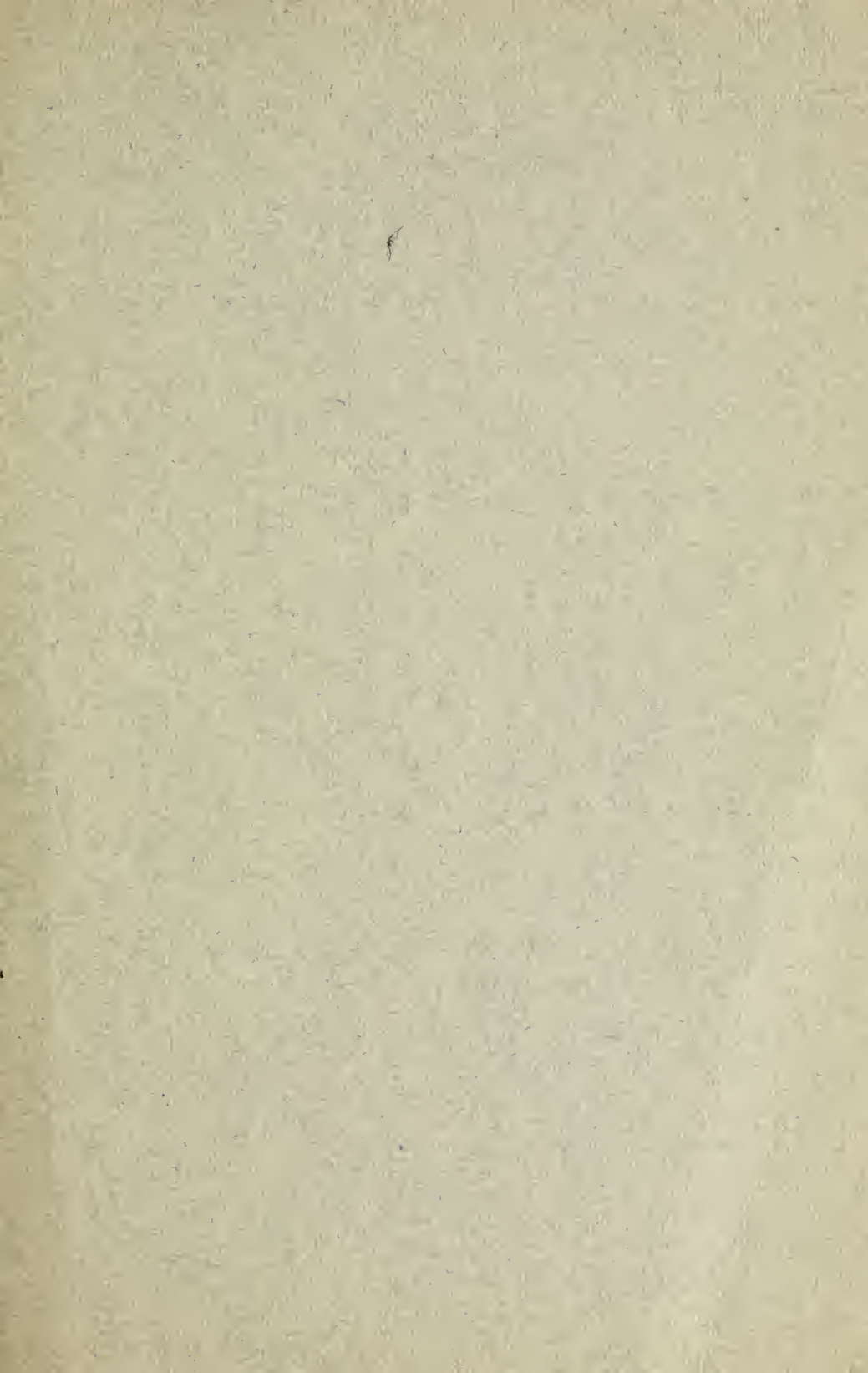
MILWAUKEE, WIS.

A municipal dance hall was established and operated by the City of Milwaukee during the administration of Mayor Emil Seidel. Young people were encouraged to attend up to the capacity of the hall and an admission fee of 25 cents per couple was charged. The police were instructed to keep out objectionable characters and maintain a proper degree of decorum among those admitted.

These public dances were increasingly successful during their period of existence. However, the municipal election held in 1912 resulted in Mayor Seidel's defeat and under the new administration the dance hall was closed. An attempt was made to have the city continue the venture, but without success.

SAN FRANCISCO, CAL.

The Board of Supervisors last December inaugurated a series of outdoor municipal dances. These dances were held on public streets paved with asphalt or bitumen. They are very popular, and owing to the mild winters, the streets set apart for the municipal dances are crowded to capacity. The city furnishes the municipal band and there is an adequate detail of police to maintain order. No admission fee is required from those taking part in the dances. Dancing begins at 8 o'clock in the evening and concludes at 11 o'clock.









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